

An Exploratory Early Literacy Study of Hispanic Children in the Spanish School in Holland

Julia Coll

Background

The majority of immigrants of Hispanic origin in the Netherlands are from Spain. Today approximately 46,000 Spaniards live in this country. The Spaniards in Holland have come with the idea of returning to Spain; therefore, they have kept in close contact with their country, and many have tried to travel to Spain at least once a year.

Julia Coll, PhD, is an associate professor of Spanish and ESL at Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio.

The Spanish government has a special interest in this group and is supportive of a policy of mother language and culture maintenance. Thus, not only does the Dutch government support classes up to the equivalent of sixth grade, or the upper Bowen Bouw School level, but the Spanish government also is committed to this task and provides financial assistance to all children of Spanish origin for seventh and eighth grades. This is done through the Consejería de Educación de la Embajada de Holanda en La Haya (Educational Attache, Embassy of Spain, The Hague). The government also supports adult education programs such as literacy and others geared to completion of secondary school certificates. Due to the reduction of Dutch government funds for these programs, as of the 1986-87 academic year, the Spanish government has also contributed to support mother tongue classes from first to sixth grade of basic school. Thus, in the case of the city of Rotterdam, the Dutch government supports 2 1/2 hours of Spanish schooling per week and the Spanish government 2. The latter contributes with curricula development and coordinates the "Spanish School in Holland."

Characteristics of the Spanish Immigrant Family

There are three general categories of minority groups in the Netherlands. One is formed by those who came from former Dutch colonies such as Suriname; the second, by those from Mediterranean countries who form part of the labor force; and the third, by those who came as refugees; Spanish immigrants are part of the second category. The typical Spanish immigrant family came to Holland approximately 20 years ago. The mother and the father are in their forties, their children are adolescents in the majority of cases, and some have small children (De Miguel et al. 1985). They came predominantly from the rural areas in Galicia, Andalucía, Extremadura, Castilla, and Canarias. Consequently, many speak a regional language at home as their primary language and Spanish.

Although the great influx of Spanish migration to the Netherlands took place over 20 years ago, families from Spain and other Spanish speaking countries are still moving to Holland. In an interview, officials from the Rotterdam Project Bureau reported that according to the statistics they obtained from the Ministry of Education and Science and the Central Bureau of Statistics in the 1985-86 school year, 4,778 Spanish children were enrolled in schools in Holland; 2,455 of those were in primary education. In 1991 and 1992 respectively, 27 and 21 new Spanish children were reported. However, 1,957 and 1,564 children, respectively, had unreported places of citizenship.

Research on Minorities in the Netherlands

The number of studies on minorities in general has been limited over the years. According to Alkan (1993) a search of the literature indicates that only 29 studies were conducted from 1951 to 1980. This number began to increase, and in 1981 there were 69 studies; in 1982, 110; in 1983, 182, and in 1984, 220. Alkan also found that during these years, 15 to 20 million Guilders (US\$ 1.00 = 1.70 Guilders) were appropriated for research in studies on minorities. Although the number of studies has increased considerably during the last decade, few studies examine issues related to the Hispanic population. This may be attributed to the relatively small number in this group when compared to members of other minority groups. Some students' unpublished theses from the University of Amsterdam and Utrecht are also available. The above information coincides with another report from the Department of Intercultural Education at Leiden University on a general inventory of research on ethnic minority children for the period of 1979 to 1985. This report states that research in this field has grown since 1982, from eight projects in 1979-1981 to more than one hundred projects started during 1982-1985. However, most of the attention has been placed on ethnic minority children of school age and over twelve; young children under six have received less attention. In addition, more than 80% of the research projects dealt with Turkish and/or Moroccan children. The studies were concentrated on school education, language acquisition, health, social welfare, and delinquency issues (Eldering & Klopogge, 1989). Others authors (Everts, Golhof, Stassen, & Teaunissen, 1985) have concluded that little is known about the condition of young ethnic minority children. More research is needed on the relationship between school and family and the factors that are connected with the development of children and their school success or failure. It is important to explore in more detail how economic, cultural, social, and ethnic factors blend to create the orientation to literacy existing in the home environment. The mother's role in the family and her interaction with her children and stimulation of their development is another area of importance.

The language development of preschool and school age ethnic minority children is what this study will attempt to tackle. It will focus specifically on literacy among Hispanic children four to seven years old because now we are finally realizing the importance of early literacy behaviors. Thus, more descriptions are needed about what and how young children are learning about literacy during their early years. All these data will help tremendously not only to explain how home background influences children's literacy competencies but also how these competencies develop.

Research on Early Literacy

Researchers in the field of literacy have made the claim that by the time children start schooling, they have an incredible amount of information and are much more literate than we realize. Many teachers and researchers have arrived at that conclusion after observing children working in reading and writing activities (Goodman, 1991).

Children can understand information rather quickly if it is presented in a meaningful way by their parents and teachers. They use all this information to hypothesize about their surrounding environment and construct their knowledge which they use when needed. By the same token, they make hypotheses about the written language. These constitute original constructions which are known as psychogenetic development. This concept has been defined by Goodman (1991) as the history of an idea or concept influenced by the learner's personal intellectual activity.

Many researchers have recognized the importance of writing in young children's literacy development. Their writing is not the standard form we are accustomed to, but it is writing nevertheless. The scribbling of very young children shows the characteristics of the writing system of the culture they are exposed to (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). The distinction between drawing and writing starts early as well. Their spelling may not be correct according to adult standards, but children are consistent and logical (Henderson & Beers, 1981).

The work of Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979) has been influential in the area of early literacy before formal schooling, and as a result many investigators in the field have applied their theory with many samples of children in different countries. This study is no exception. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), in working with many Spanish speaking children from four to six years old, from different socioeconomic levels in other countries showed evidence of five stages of literacy development. They also suggested that not all children go through the same stages sequentially. Some are able to move ahead; some will stop for awhile in one stage.

In the first stage of no differentiation, writing is characterized by straight lines, curves, or both, and children may add circles. At this stage, children can interpret their own writing but not others'. They write short when referring to small objects and long for large objects. They still are not concerned with the sound value and have conflicts when the need to write long words to refer to small objects arises and vice versa, for example: lion and butterfly. This conflict

stimulates their search for other alternatives. At this level, children also seem to think that they need at least three graphemes for something to be readable. They also accept words with repeated letters if their order varies. According to this level of interpretation, their hypothesis of variability is manifested.

At the second level, the central hypothesis suggests that in order to read different things, there must be a clear difference in the writing. In this level, they continue to expand the notion of a minimum number of graphemes in order to write. Since they do not have a large repertoire, they continue to work on changing the position of the letters.

At the third level, children begin to work with the notion that each letter within a written segment must have a sound value relationship and that each letter is equivalent to a syllable. That is how they arrive at their syllabic hypothesis. They can relate parts of the text letter by letter and parts of the oral expression. They abbreviate words by syllables, for example: "G T" to write the word for gato (cat). They use consonants or vowels to make their representation.

At level four, they move from the syllabic to the alphabetic hypothesis in their search to solve their conflict between the syllabic hypothesis and the minimum number of graphemes. Furthermore, they need to make decisions when encountering texts in their environment which do not coincide with their syllabic hypothesis. If their environment does not provide them the necessary graphic input in the form of books, newspapers, magazines, signs, etc., which creates the conflict, they stop at this level.

At level five, children write alphabetically, and frequently their writing is characterized by writing words together.

The Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979) levels summarized above will serve as a frame of reference in this study to show the points of coincidence in the process of construction of literacy among young Hispanic children attending the "Spanish School in Holland" within the Dutch educational system.

The Spanish School in Holland

Children who trace their origins to Spain may attend two programs. One is an integrated model. In the integrated model the children attend mother tongue and culture classes as part of the regular curriculum. They do this during their regular school schedule at a central location. Some of the students may be attending the same school while the others come from other schools. This model is used in Rotterdam. The other model is common not only in Amsterdam but in the rest of the country. It is not integrated like the previous model.

Students, therefore, need to meet at a central school on Saturday mornings or Wednesday after their regular school hours. In each program students attend between 2 and 2 1/2 hours a week.

It is difficult for the Spanish teachers to tell what the new generation of 4-6 year old Hispanic children know about language and what language they speak when they come to school in Holland. Part of the reason needs to be examined from an ethnographic perspective. The ethnic composition of third generation Hispanic children (from Spain) in the Netherlands is changing rapidly, and teachers working in the Spanish Language and Culture Program in Holland are beginning to notice it. These teachers are confronted with the situation of not knowing what the mother tongue of these children is. Therefore, they are unsure about which language they should use with these children and what to teach. Also teachers are beginning to see an influx of children whose parents come from Spanish speaking countries other than Spain. As a result of these concerns among Spanish teachers in Holland, the following exploratory literacy study evolved.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose was to examine the condition of young children (four to seven-years-old) of Spanish background living in the Netherlands as to their actual ethnic background, their parents' origin, language(s) spoken at home, school infrastructure (where and how do they work), and the proportion of this age group in relation to other age groups. The second purpose was to observe the psychogenesis of literacy in a Spanish language and culture program within the Dutch socioeducational system. More specifically, the objective of this study was to explore literacy awareness among very young Hispanic children when they come to school.

Method

A sample of 20 children between four to seven years of age participated in the study. They represented a wide spectrum of diversity among the Hispanic group (see Figure 1). The children attended different schools in the city of Rotterdam. This city was chosen for two reasons: (a) it seemed to display more diversity among these children's age group, and (b) the teachers and the curriculum coordinator were more willing to cooperate in the study. For example, they assisted in the selection of participants.

An Exploratory Early Literacy Study of
Hispanic Children in the Spanish School
in Holland

Figure 1. Student Meeting at DeTriangel School

Name	Age	Origin		Occupation		Home Language
		Mother	Father	Mother	Father	
Ivan	5	Spain	Spain	unknown		Spanish
Leonardo	5	Colombia	Holland	unknown		Span/Dutch
Esteban I	5	Chile	Spain	Hosp.aux	Train Opr	Spanish
Esteban II	5	Holland (2nd. gen/Spain)	Holland	unknown		Dutch
Jennifer	6	Holland (2nd gen/Spain)	Holland	Housewife	Driver	Spanish
Fabian	6	Spain	Spain	Seamstress-		Spanish
Tamara	6	Holland (2nd gen/Spain)	Holland	unknown		Spanish
Lorena	7	(Jennifer's sister)				
Cindy	8	Holland	Spain	Housewife		Dutch
Pascal	8	(Esteban I's brother)				
Amanda	4	Galicia (Spain)	Holland	unknown		Dutch
Nuria	6	Galicia	(both)	Comp. Elec.		Span/Dutch
Dani	5	Galicia (Spain)	Andalucía	Tel.Sales		Span/Dutch
Malu	6	Holland		-	Marketing	Dutch/Spain
Anabelle	6	Galicia	(both)	Cleaning		Span/Gallego
Laura	8	Galicia	(both)	Bill collector		Span/Gallego
Gregorio	7	Uruguay	(both)	Inform.Syst.		Span/Ital
Jessica	6	Colombia	(both)	unknown		Spanish
Ofelia	7	Domin. Repub/Holl.		unknown		Spanish
Nadia	7	Tenerife Spain/ Suriname		Hospital		Spanish

The data collection began with preliminary class observations and informal interviews with the children, parents, and teachers. Then, students were asked to draw and write. One group drew what they liked to draw the most, which pertained to their daily life, and they wrote their own names. The other group was asked to write a response to the labels they were presented during another activity. They also drew about the theme they were working with during that time in the school year, which was flowers (spring). For this drawing, they were also requested to write their names and title their drawings. After this activity, they were all interviewed individually. The interviews were also videotaped. The first two questions were (a) Do you know how to read and write? (b) Why do people read? Other questions related to the children's drawings and writings followed: Tell me about what you drew. What does it say (related to the title if they wrote one, or their name)? Two more questions were asked after they explained what they just had finished doing: (a) Do you think it is the same to draw and write?, and (b) Why do people write?

Results

Ethnic Composition of the Sample. The following characterizes twenty children attending different Dutch schools in Rotterdam who meet at the Agnes school and DeTriangel schools for Spanish language and culture classes during the regular school schedule. The environment in these two schools has been described as cordial and friendly. Teachers work hard with the students and are eager to come to school everyday. Children four to six years of age come to school between 8:30 and 8:45 a.m. and leave to go home for lunch between 11:30 and 11:45. Then, they return around 1-1:15 until 3 or 3:15. While the other school children do the common activities performed at any Dutch school for this age group, the Spanish children are engaged in the Spanish program. In order to organize the Spanish language and culture class, the Spanish teachers use the same theme of the week from the Dutch school where they are working with their Spanish group.

Three students had just turned 8, and four 7-year-olds, seven 6-year-olds, five 5-year-olds, and one 4-year-old, participated. Thirty-five percent have both parents from Spain, 10% from Latin America, 5% from Spain and Suriname, and 15% both parents from Holland. None of the parents attended higher education; all stopped their education somewhere in secondary school. The majority of them held clerical positions, some in tram maintenance, hospital cleaning, and telephone sales. Some of them did not want to state their

occupation because they were unemployed at the time. About 50% of these children's parents were unemployed and did not wish to talk about it. In this group, a variety of languages were spoken in their homes. Thus, the majority, 45%, spoke only Spanish at home; 20% spoke Spanish and Nederland, 20% Nederland, 10% Spanish and Gellego (Galicia's regional language), and 5% Spanish and Italian.

Discussion

In the Netherlands, children in schools are introduced to their name's letters at the end of second grade, usually when they are six years old. In third grade, they are introduced to the rest of the alphabet with a specific calligraphy, and only small letters are presented. During fourth grade, they are taught capital letters.

In the group from De Triangel school, Fabian, Jennifer, Leonardo, and Cindy were able to write their names. Fabian started his name with a capital letter, Leonardo used all capital letters, Jennifer used all small letters, and Cindy used small cursive letters. Esteban I and Esteban II used invented spelling to write their names. Esteban II used the right number of symbols, though some of them were upside down. Esteban I used straight lines and circles which is characteristic of level I presyllabic. Esteban I seemed to feel the need for more graphemes to write his name. He also seemed to realize that each segment needs to be represented by a letter which places him between sub-levels I and II at the presyllabic stage. Tamara wrote her name with small letters and used invented spelling. Ivan used capital letters to start his name and knew which letters to use. De Pascal just turned eight and had no problem writing in both Spanish and Nederland.

Dani knew how to write his name and used a capital letter, represented objects by drawing, but he refused to write anything else. Nuria knew how to write her name and wrote the names of the objects she drew. Her teacher's name is Margarita, and the theme they were working with that week was flowers. She used the same letters and same number of letters to label the daisy which translates into Margarita. She wrote her teacher's name with two vowels in combination with two consonants representing one syllable.

A F R A



Mar ga ri ta

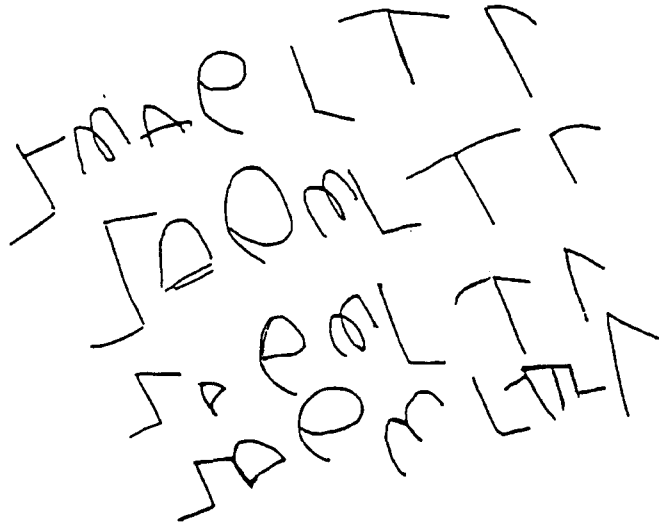
She wrote one of the words to name pig "cerdo" which she drew bigger than the one to label ladybug. She also used 5 letters for cerdo and 4 for Mariquita, the name in Spanish for ladybug. To write Mariquita she seemed to use the same approach as for the proper names.

N U L A M



Nuria is working her way through from the presyllabic to the syllabic level and seems to know that each letter in the word has a sound correspondence and equivalent to one syllable.

Amanda likes to write and draw. Her writing is characterized by a combination of straight and circular symbols. Her writing of the words below, for her own name Amanda, mother, father, and Margarita (top to bottom), look very much alike. However, when she wrote the name for ladybug, a very small insect, she used a very small number of letters; in contrast to the word she wrote for lobo (many more letters). This performance is typical at the presyllabic level.



Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) explained that the figurative form is present in writing in two ways. One is directly by graphic representation. The second is indirectly by the association of number, size, or quality of the letters to the characteristics of the object represented. When children do not connect oral language and writing, the figurative forms are not represented yet. They use criteria related with the qualities of what is represented using the number of letters in the words.

Malu could write her own name and combined vowels and consonants to write "Bambi est⁴en el libro" (Bambi is in the book). Nevertheless, she mixed some of the sounds of the words in Nederland with Spanish, and she struggled writing this sentence in Spanish. However, in Nederland she wrote the sentence: "Ik hou van katten" ("I like cats.") with no difficulty. It appears as if she has not received enough Spanish graphic input to develop her writing as she has in Nederland, where she seemed to be at the alphabetic level.

Anabel reacted to McDonalds by writing: "Me gusta la hamburguesa de McDonalds" ("I like McDonalds' hamburgers."). She wrote McDonalds with no problem because she copied it from the label. This shows her ability to copy as a way to conventionalize her writing. She invented the spelling for the other words disregarding word segmentation. She seemed to be just getting at the alphabetic level.

Laura wrote "I like Palmolive," clearly in Nederland and Spanish. Gregorio provided an ample reaction to a brand name of coffee. He wrote: "A mis padres les gusta la Perla" ("My parents like Pearl coffee."). "Los Niños no pueden tomar la Perla" ("Children cannot drink la Perla."). "El rey come una torta y

bebe la Perla" (The king eats a piece of cake and drinks la Perla."). "Albert Hejn hizo la Perla" ("Albert Hejn made la Perla."). (Albert Hejn is a big supermarket chain in the Netherlands.). Gregorio's performance suggested his ability to relate print to his own life experiences. He could write equally well in Nederland and Italian.

Jessica could not write her reaction in Spanish, but she wrote an incomplete sentence in Nederland about her liking of hamburgers from Burger King: "Ik vin de hamburg van burgen king." Her performance placed her at the alphabetic level.

Ofelia tried to write her reaction to a Winnie cartoon. Her words were all together. She appeared to be somewhere in between the syllabic and alphabetic levels. She struggled to put a sentence together; when she put the words together, she represented Nederland sounds on more than one word together.

Nadia tried to write that when she gets up in the morning, she eats corn flakes. She did this without word segmentation. There is also a combination of Nederland and Spanish sounds represented.

The responses from these children provide us with evidence of their awareness even among the youngest that this is a message when they interact with print and read coffee in responding to the PEARL label or "huele bien" (smells good) in response to Palmolive.

They believe they have written a message for someone or for themselves even when they scribble. Amanda's writing is a clear case when she uses the same symbols to write Amanda, mother, father, Margarita, and she said: "Aqui dice: Amanda, Mamá, Papá, Margarita" ("Here says: Amanda, Mom, Dad, Margarita."). These children were involved in reading and writing. They were transacting with print in making sense of the labels they were reading and then in their written forms. Some of the young participants in the study read the labels by giving the precise information or the function of the label "coffee" for PEARL; wash hands, or smells good for Palmolive. Although the children were able to interact with the print presented, they did not consider that reading, as indicated by their responses to the question: "Do you know how to read?" during the interview.

Most of the children in this sample differentiated writing from drawing. Only 20% thought it was the same, and 5% did not know.

These children (including the five and six-year-olds) showed they had a great deal of experience with reading and writing of letters and greeting cards and work-related activities. Most of them (65%), recognized the functional aspect of these two activities at home. They also responded correctly to the directionality of reading moving from top to bottom and from left to right and back to left.

From the interviews with the children and the observations of their behavior while conducting the literacy activities, we also have evidence that they know about the general structure and organization of reading although they may not fully comprehend how written discourse is segmented and punctuated. But their responses indicate they knew how to handle books, their purposes, who writes them, for whom, how to turn the pages, direction, and the specific functions reading and writing have. Anabelle's response is an example of how children seem to be aware that reading and writing are related activities.

The children in this study also knew that there were capital letters and more letters besides the ones used to spell their names. Some of the five- and six-year-olds proved they already understood that information before being taught in school as shown in their writing samples.

One of the children, Fabián, realized words can have more than three letters, but he said he could only read words with three. However, he read the label of a Fanta can. He offered a response about why he was able to read it: "Because the first letter is F, the same as my name."

The results of this study support the claim made by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979) that children begin literacy before coming into contact with teachers and school. Those children who do not have experiences with books and written materials just begin the process of literacy when they arrive at school age. Those children are presyllabic, while those who have more experiences with print will tend to be alphabetic in their knowledge about the written language.

Conclusion

This study examined the condition of a sample of Hispanic children and their literacy development within the Dutch educational system. This work suggests that children make their own conclusions not only about written texts, but also about the contexts in which these texts appear according to their experiences. Their responses to the printed materials in their Rotterdam environment show not only the development of their perception of different print forms and the different messages that these texts convey, but also their capacity to express these messages throughout their answers. The concern with literacy development here is of a practical nature. How can our findings about how these children learn written language help us develop curriculum materials to be used by Spanish teachers in the Spanish School in Holland? This was the starting point: investigating where the children are coming from and what and how they learn. We need to recognize the importance of these beginnings. Otherwise, we cannot build on the strengths children already have and are continually developing in

their search for meaning throughout the written language. Teachers need to be in contact with children's parents or the adults who take care of them. Then, they need to ask them to observe closely how children learn when they are together and then report back to them. It is important for those in teaching and curriculum development to build on this knowledge base and to exploit children's search for meaning through the written form of language. Teachers and curriculum developers need to account for the knowledge and theories that already exist about how children develop written language before coming to school when they prepare materials, work with children, and provide pre-service and in-service activities for others teachers. In these activities, teachers need to be assisted to observe and assess children's language development within the literate contexts that provide their social environment through which children learn so much about written language.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Prof. K. de Glopper, Director of the Center for Educational Research, University of Amsterdam, for the opportunity to be a visiting scholar in the center in 1993; also to Eugenia Codina, Joss Broere, and Manuel Figueiredo from the Rotterdam Educational Project Bureau, for their valuable information and support; to the Spanish teachers Margarita Alonso and Carmen Payán for sharing their classrooms and time; and finally, to my husband Frank Byrne for proofreading the manuscript.

References

Alkan, M. (1993). Seminar lecture on Race and Ethnic Relations in Education. University of Amsterdam.

Clay, M. (1975). *What did i write?* Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational.

De Miguel, A. et al. (1985). *Informe sobre los emigrantes españoles en Europa*. Madrid: Instituto Español de Emigración.

Eldering, L., & Klopogge, J. (1989). Different cultures, same school. Ethnic minority children in Europe. Amsterdam/Lisse/Berwyn:Swets and Zeitlingen, Amsterdam/Lisse.

Everts, H., Golhof, A., Stassen, P., & Teaunissen, J. (1985). State of affairs of the research on ethnic minority pupils in education. Utrecht: Vakgroep Onderwijskunde, Rijksuniversiteit, Utrecht.

Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1979). *Los sistemas de escritura en el desarrollo del niño*. Mexico, Siglo XXI.

Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy before schooling*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Goodman, Y. (Ed.), El conocimiento infantil acerca del desarrollo de la alfabetización. In *Los niños construyen su escritura*. (pp. 129-137). Y. Goodman (Comp.). Aique.

Henderson, E. & Beers, J. (Eds.), (1981). Developmental and cognitive aspects of learning to spell. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Rotterdam Project Bureau (CED). Burg. Van Walsumweq 892. Rotterdam. The Netherlands